DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 934 EC 306 479

AUTHOR	Landau, Julia K.
TITLE	Statewide Assessment: Policy Issues, Questions, and Strategies. PEER Policy Paper.
INSTITUTION	Federation for Children with Special Needs, Boston, MA.
SPONS AGENCY	Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	8p.
CONTRACT	HO29K50208
AVAILABLE FROM	Parents Engaged in Education Reform (PEER), Federation for Children with Special Needs, 95 Berkeley Street, Suite 104, Boston, MA 02116; telephone/TTY: 617-482-2915; fax: 617-695-2939; e-mail: peer@fcsn.org; World Wide Web: http://www.fcsn.org/peer
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Advocacy; *Compliance (Legal); *Disabilities; *Educational Assessment; Educational Change; Educational Legislation; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Legislation; Federal State Relationship; *Inclusive Schools; Parent Participation; State Departments of Education
IDENTIFIERS	Alternative Assessment; *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amend; *Testing Accommodations (Disabilities)

ABSTRACT

This policy paper provides a list of questions and associated strategies that parents and parent organizations can address in an effort to ensure that statewide assessment systems fully and fairly include students with disabilities as required by the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and other federal laws. Introductory material notes the purposes of these large-scale assessments and the relation of statewide assessment programs to education reform initiatives. Suggested questions address the following issues: type of assessment used, use of "off the shelf" or contracted assessments, the process for developing the assessment, the consequences for students of the statewide assessments, inclusion of all students with disabilities in the assessment, responsibility for determining if a student with disabilities needs accommodations to participate in the assessment, types of accommodations available to students with disabilities, how test results are to be used, and how test scores of students with disabilities will be reported. Among seven strategies recommended to parents are the following: (1) obtain copies of the state's education reform and assessment legislation, regulations, and policy documents; (2) identify who makes policy decisions about participation of students with disabilities; and (3) get involved in the decision-making process. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 420 934

peer policy paper

Statewide Assessment: Policy Issues, Questions, and Strategies

prepared by Julia K. Landau, J.D.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

This policy paper provides a list of questions that parents and parent organizations can address in an effort to ensure that statewide assessment systems fully and fairly include students with disabilities. In the past, students with disabilities have too often been excluded from large-scale assessments. However, students with disabilities now must be included in state assessment programs with appropriate accommodations, as required by the recent amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as well as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Statewide assessments have enormous ramifications for students with disabilities. Assessments frequently serve as the cornerstone of efforts to improve education. If students with disabilities are excluded from the development and administration of statewide assessments, it is less likely that they will benefit from overall school reform improvements. Also, statewide assessments can be a way to hold schools accountable for improving educational outcomes for all students. If students with disabilities are excluded, they may not be considered when important educational policy decisions are made.

Statewide assessments are different from the three-year individualized evaluations required by IDEA for students receiving special education services. For students in special education, a variety of tests and assessments are used to determine whether the student continues to need special education and to identify the student's specific educational needs. In contrast, statewide large-scale assessments are usually standardized, "paper and pencil" assessments. The goals of statewide assessment programs also differ from those of special

Parents Engaged in Education Reform, a project of the Federation for Children with Special Needs, Boston, MA

EC 306479

PEER
Parents Engaged in Education Reform
is a project of the
Federation for Children with Special Needs
95 Berkeley Street
Suite 104
Boston, MA 02116
Web:
www.fcsn.org/peer
Email:
peer@fcsn.org
Voice/TTY:
(617) 482-2915
Fax:
(617) 695-2939

education assessments. Usually, the purpose of a large-scale assessment is two-fold:

1. to provide information about individual student achievement, and
2. to gauge the success of schools and school systems — to hold educators accountable for student attainment of educational outcomes.

Almost all states now have some type of statewide assessment program as a result of education reform initiatives. Many states will now need to revise their assessment policies in order to comply with new IDEA amendments and ensure participation of all students with disabilities. Parents who are knowledgeable about diverse learners (including students with IEPs) need to become active participants in the development of assessment policies. The following questions are intended as a guide to effective participation during this period of reform and change.

What type of assessment will the state use?

It is important to know what kind of assessment your state administers. Typically, a state's assessment includes one or more of the following types of assessments:

1. multiple-choice questions;
2. performance-based assessments, in which students demonstrate their knowledge through short-answer, open-ended, and essay questions; and
3. portfolio assessment, in which examples of students' work (essays, models, or reports) are assembled to document student progress.

Find out which type of assessment your state will administer, and the subject areas covered, then analyze what you think will best meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Which assessment or which contractor will the state use?

Find out if your state will use assessments that have already been developed ("off-the-shelf" assessments) or if the state will develop its own assessment, aligned with the state's standards. Ensure that the company selected to administer or develop the test has sufficient expertise and experience in assessing students with disabilities.

What is the process for developing the assessment?

It is important to design the assessments so that they do not discriminate against students with disabilities. Often when developing a new assessment, a bias committee is established. The bias committee, which traditionally addresses race discrimination, should also address discrimination on the basis of disability. Individuals with disabilities and individuals with expertise in disability bias should be included on the committee.

Such a committee is important because some test questions rely on information unavailable to a child because of his or her disability. In addition, students with all types and severities of disabilities should fully participate in all samples, trials, and field tests.

What are the "stakes" or consequences of the statewide assessment?

It is important for parents to know how test results will be used. Find out whether students are required to "pass" the assessment in order to receive a high school diploma. Many states link assessment results to graduation. Additionally, some states use assessment results as a basis for student promotion, student awards, or recognition of exemplary performance.

Furthermore, some states use assessment results as a direct accountability tool for educators and school systems, for example, linking test scores with bonuses, school funding, or accreditation.

Will all students with disabilities participate in the statewide assessment?

Among the most critical issues to explore are your state's policy and practices for allowing students with disabilities to participate in the statewide assessment. Recent amendments to IDEA specifically require states to include all children with disabilities in assessment programs. The ADA and Section 504 similarly require participation of students with disabilities.

Despite these requirements, currently some states exempt certain groups of students with disabilities from the state assessment, based on disability categories, the child's reading level, or the restrictiveness of the child's placement. Other states already include all students in the assessment system, providing accommodations or alternate assessments that enable students with disabilities to participate fully.

It is crucial to ensure that all students with disabilities participate in the statewide assessment, as required by law. If students with disabilities are excluded from testing, there is no mechanism to determine whether these students receive the benefits of education reform. Further, if certain groups of disabled students are exempt, then the achievement of the excluded students will not be considered when evaluating a school or school district's performance. Schools will have less incentive to improve education for students whose scores do not count. For those states where test results have significant consequences for the individual students, such as receipt of a diploma, participation becomes even more critical.

Who determines if a student with disabilities needs accommodations in order to participate in the assessment?

IDEA now requires that a child's IEP specify the need for modifications in the administration of a state (or district-wide) assessment. Through the IEP process, individualized decisions must be made regarding whether a student with a disability can participate in the statewide assessment "as is" (without accommodations) or whether the student requires accommodations in order to participate. In some cases the IEP team may determine that a student requires an alternate assessment in order to receive an equal opportunity to demonstrate his or her proficiency and achievement.

Most states currently rely on the IEP team to determine how students with disabilities will participate in the statewide assessment. The individual decisions regarding assessment are subject to due process procedures required by IDEA.

What type of accommodations are available to students with disabilities?

States currently have wide-ranging policies regarding the type of accommodations available for assessments. There are generally four types of accommodations that should be considered by the IEP team:

- Timing of test: e.g., extended time, breaks, extending over days, time of day
- Setting of test: e.g., small group, alone, front of room, carrel
- Presentation of questions: e.g., large print, braille, readers, sign language, assistive technology
- Methods of response: e.g., dictate to scribe, point to response, sign language, computer, tape recorder

Some states allow students to use the same accommodations for assessment that are included in students' IEPs and used in classroom instruction. Other states have a limited list of "approved accommodations" that IEP teams must choose from. In this case, IEP teams should still be allowed to specify unlisted accommodations if necessary to ensure equal opportunity to participate in the assessment.

Accommodations necessary to remove barriers to participation must be provided. It is important to acknowledge that use of some types of accommodations can be controversial. These issues become most apparent when the accommodation is closely related to the skill being assessed (i.e., reading a reading test). State policy which allows IEP teams to consider the full range of accommodations, including those utilized in classroom instruction, such as a reader for all subjects, will best protect against discrimination in test

administration. Such a policy is critical, especially for high-stakes tests.

IDEA recognizes that some students may require "alternate" assessments in order to participate in the state assessment system. The recent amendments to IDEA require states to develop and begin conducting alternate assessments no later than July 1, 2000.

How will the test results be used?

The way test results will be used at the classroom and school level is very important. This issue is especially critical for students who perform poorly on the assessment. Test results should be used to ensure that these students receive the instructional support and opportunities they need to improve their performance, and to further ensure that any remedial educational opportunities are provided in the mainstream. Test results should not be used as a basis for holding students back, tracking, or pull-out instruction, and the test results alone should not be used as basis for referral to special education.

How will the test scores of students with disabilities be reported?

States usually report school-wide and district-wide test scores, as well as individual student scores. Exclusion of students with disabilities from assessment has led to exclusion of many students from these reports. Recent amendments to IDEA require that school systems disaggregate as well as aggregate test scores of students with disabilities. Therefore, consistent with IDEA, states should report the scores of students with and without disabilities together (aggregating the scores), in addition to providing the test scores of students with disabilities separately (disaggregating the scores).

When the scores of students with disabilities and students without disabilities are reported together ("aggregated"), it is clear that the progress of all students will be given equal weight when evaluating the effectiveness of public school systems. At the same time, it is also important to provide mechanisms to separate the scores of students with disabilities in order to hold schools accountable for their achievement. Many states will need to change their reporting practices to comply with new IDEA reporting requirements.

Making an Impact: Strategies for improving your state's assessment policy

✔ ***Obtain copies of your state's education reform and assessment legislation, regulations, and policy documents.***

- Call your state Department of Education to request these documents. You can also request them from your local legislator.
- Review state documents to determine current policy regarding inclusion of students with disabilities and provision of accommodations.
- Decide whether a change in law or policy is necessary to ensure inclusion of all students with disabilities in statewide assessment with necessary accommodations. You can contact your state's Parent Center, Protection and Advocacy organization, disability and children's advocacy organizations, or the American Civil Liberties Union to request assistance in reviewing your state's law and policy.
- Propose changes to your state law and policy that will address concerns about inclusion of students with disabilities.
- Work with key stakeholders (other parent and disability organizations, P&A, children's advocacy organizations, state special education advisory committee, etc.) to secure the changes necessary to fully and fairly include all students with disabilities in assessment.

✔ ***Identify who will be making policy decisions about participation of students with disabilities.***

- The state Department of Education or your local legislator can help you to determine whether the legislature, state board of education, or department of education will be the leader in this area.

✔ ***Get involved in the decision-making process.***

- If your state or district has an assessment advisory group, join the group or ensure that parents of children with disabilities, adults with disabilities, and special education and inclusion experts are appointed to the group. The state Department of Education or your superintendent can inform you whether an advisory group exists.
- Set up meetings with the decision-makers, and provide materials and information to support your positions about the policy questions listed above. Provide proposed language for necessary policy changes, and provide examples of students with disabilities who may be excluded from the assessment.

✓***Consider a variety of advocacy strategies to effect changes in your state policy and practice.***

Any of the following strategies may prove to be useful or necessary: dissemination of position papers, proposals, and reports; providing information and training to parents of children with disabilities statewide; meeting with staff at the Department of Education; testifying before legislative hearings, the State Advisory Council (SAC), and state Board of Education; providing information to media; filing complaints with the Office for Civil Rights or OSEP; and legal action.

✓***Identify other organizations or constituencies with similar concerns and positions.***

Bilingual parent groups, Title I parent groups, PTAs, teacher unions, and educators' professional organizations may prove to be useful allies.

✓***Ensure that the organization administering your state's assessment is qualified to assess students with disabilities.***

- Contact the PEER Project or the Parent Center in your state to get information about contractors and assessments being considered for selection or already chosen by your state. Ascertain the experience and expertise of testers in including students with disabilities in assessments, and the appropriateness of proposed tests. You can also call The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FAIR Test), at (617) 864-4810 for information.
- Develop questions to ask all contractors to ascertain their history and expertise in including students with disabilities. For instance, ask them for the percentage of students with disabilities who have participated in other assessments they have developed. Request policies regarding participation and accommodations for other assessments they administer. Request resumes of the staff who will be involved in the project. Request specific details about the organization's experience including students with severe disabilities.

✓***Ensure that participation in assessments is fully addressed at IEP meetings.***

- Work with your local school district or state Department of Education to ensure that IEPs specifically address participation in statewide (or district-wide) assessments. IEP members must specify whether the student with a disability can participate in the assessment:
(1) under routine conditions;
(2) with accommodations, or
(3) with an alternate assessment.
The IEP should state the specific types of accommodations or alternate assessment required.
- Consider whether changes to the IEP form developed by the state Department of Education or local district would help IEP teams fully and fairly address these issues.

© 1998 Federation for Children with Special Needs, Boston, MA